

Turning tradition into an instrument of research: The editorship of William Nicholson (1753–1815)

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Editorship and the Editing of Scientific
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Abstract

Mainly known for its links to the periodical market and radical politics, this article recontextualizes the editorship of William Nicholson (1753–1815) in terms of its roots in the metropolitan natural philosophical circles of the second half of the 18th century as well as its impact on experimenters and men of science after 1797. The article argues that Nicholson's editorship of the *Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, and the Arts* was a means to expand his philosophical significance among natural philosophers at home and abroad—and was, in fact, a form of epistemological subversion that challenged the “Banksian Learned Empire.”

KEYWORDS

early nineteenth century, Joseph Banks, editorship, late eighteenth century, Royal Society, scientific journals, William Nicholson

Today, the scientific editor is a role in search of a capable individual. In the mid-1790s, the Englishman William Nicholson (1753–1815) was an individual in search of a natural philosophical role—and he found it in editorship. According to his contemporaries, he was the first individual in Britain to edit a philosophical periodical independently of a philosophical society and without any institutionalized support.¹ He curated the *Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and the Arts* (1797–1813), which was known to his British contemporaries as “Nicholson's *Journal*” and regarded as “a monument of the industry, acquisitions, and ability of the conductor as few men will leave behind them.”²

¹“Memoir of William Nicholson” (1812, p. 86).

²“Memoir of William Nicholson” (1812, p. 86).

Nicholson's editorship has featured in recent scholarship by Jon Topham and Iain Watts.³ Topham focused on the journal as a commodity, and presented Nicholson as one of several British philosophical editors whose editorship was embedded in the periodical market. This focus on the commercial dimension of philosophical editorship appears, more generally, to have been influenced by the wave of book history that goes back to Robert Darnton and inspired the science historical work of Jim Secord, Aileen Fyfe, Adrian Johns, Topham, and others. These scholars have added commercial and economic elements to our understanding of the communicational infrastructure of philosophy, tremendously expanding the history of scientific publishing, particularly regarding the philosophical book and periodical.

This article changes the familiar focus: it discusses Nicholson not in an economic but in a philosophical context. According to Nicholson's contemporaries, his *Journal* "has so long been in the hands of the learned of all Europe" and "is every where [sic] quoted in their writings."⁴ Nicholson's *Journal* was a philosophical instrument for European men of science, and his editorship enjoyed international credibility and renown. This article does not attempt to stylize Nicholson as an *éminence grise* of European philosophical discourse; instead, it sheds light on the reasons why Nicholson assumed editorship in the first place, and investigates the editorial strategies and tactics that made his periodical of use to experimenters across Europe.

To understand why Nicholson undertook his editorship, we need to become more closely familiar with two elements: first, Nicholson's long and ambitious struggle to establish himself among London's philosophical circles, with the hope of becoming a Fellow of the Royal Society (1780s and early 1790s) and, second, his conflict with Sir Joseph Banks in the mid-1790s, which scholars have not analyzed until now. These two elements will be the topics of the first half of the paper.

Watts studied the conflicts between Nicholson and Sir Joseph Banks that unfolded due to Nicholson's editorial interests and the steps he took in 1802. In his article, Watts introduced Nicholson as closely linked to the metropolitan circles of radical political authors, journalists, and editors—thereby locating Nicholson at the periphery of philosophy, "operating on the margins of the scientific elite."⁵ The early part of this paper puts forward a different interpretation: because Nicholson managed to gain access to some of the same philosophical circles as Banks and, at some point, even enjoyed Banks's support, the two men experienced a notably more consequential conflict prior to the events of 1802 described by Watts. Furthermore, this piece argues that the misunderstandings between the two men in 1802 were not necessarily as dramatic as Watts has suggested.

Like Watts's piece, this paper, too, proposes to consider Nicholson in political terms—but not for his links to political radicals, as Watts pointed out. Instead, Nicholson's break with the historical convention of collective philosophical editorship by assuming independent editorship can be understood as political or, perhaps more suitably, philosophical subversion, due to Nicholson's and Banks's socio-cultural differences.

In the second part, this paper traces Nicholson's editorial strategies and tactics that allowed his journal to serve his readers and contributors as a valuable day-to-day instrument of philosophical enquiry, and enabled its editor to earn a high reputation among his contemporaries. The focus rests particularly on editorial features that distinguished Nicholson's periodical from the transactions of learned societies, thus demonstrating that his *Journal* was not merely a by-product of the burgeoning periodical market, but that it strategically strengthened the communication infrastructure of philosophy and, therefore, played an important epistemological role.

1 | DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Nicholson and Banks were neighbors at Soho Square, albeit rather unlikely ones. Banks, heir to a large landowning family from Lincolnshire, received his education at Harrow, Eton, and Oxford. Nicholson, a lawyer's son, abandoned formal education at the age of 16 and signed up with the British East India Company as a sailor boy. Banks was

³Topham (2013; 2016); Watts (2014).

⁴"Memoir of William Nicholson" (1812, p. 86).

⁵Watts (2014, p. 402).

acquainted with the king; Nicholson was associated with political radicals. In 1781, Banks was made baronet. Nicholson never held any titles. The ceremony in which Banks was made a Knight of the Order of the Bath cost him several hundred pounds—more than Nicholson's annual income.⁶ Banks was the President of the Royal Society for more than 40 years, served as an advisor to King George III, and shaped colonial politics. Nicholson published well-received introductory books to chemistry. Banks's wealth at his death was roughly £40,000; Nicholson died in debt.

Although Nicholson was nowhere near as rich as Banks, he could afford to live in Soho Square due to the changes in its inhabitants: by the mid-18th century, the nobility and gentry had begun to move further west, to Mayfair and beyond.⁷ Banks remained; after all, his residence at 32 Soho Square had garnered international renown for its owner's collections.⁸ At his house at 10 Soho Square, Nicholson gave classes on philosophy, usually teaching groups of 10–20 adolescents. Banks curated a library that attracted visitors from within and without Britain.⁹ Nicholson's "zeal for science and heedlessness as to the value of literary materials made him tear up books ... to save time and trouble, without bestowing a thought on the ruin he committed."¹⁰ This anecdote is illustrative of Nicholson's notable passion for philosophy, as well as his (sometimes literal but) strategic break with the philosophical tradition of print, which this paper will discuss in more detail.

2 | NICHOLSON'S PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVITIES DURING THE 1780S

The roots of Nicholson's editorship reach back to the 1780s, the period when philosophy became one of his main interests and personal priorities and he began to establish himself among London's men of science. In mid-December 1783, at the age of 30, Nicholson became a member of the Chapter Coffee House philosophical society. According to Trevor Levere and Gerard Turner, "[t]he members of the Coffee House Society exchanged scientific information, discussed experiments, and contemplated industrial improvements."¹¹ The society was formed in December 1780 and existed for 6.5 years.¹² Its meetings took place at the Chapter Coffee House on Paternoster Row every fortnight, providing a regular routine that was beneficial for Nicholson, allowing him to forge long-term philosophical friendships and contacts. At its peak, the society numbered 55 members, 33 of whom either were or would become Fellows of the Royal Society, among them the physician George Pearson and the chemist James Smithson, both of whom went on to become repeated contributors to Nicholson's *Journal*.¹³

Arguably the most famous philosopher that Nicholson met at the Coffee House Society—and a valuable contact for his editorial undertaking—was Richard Kirwan. Kirwan was the society's "prime mover," as well as a highly regarded Fellow of the Royal Society.¹⁴ He had received the Royal Society's Copley Medal for his experiments on chemical affinity, and his *Essay on Phlogiston* was translated and republished in a number of European countries, including France and the Holy Roman Empire. Kirwan would go on to contribute 11 articles to Nicholson's periodical. In short, Nicholson's regular attendance at the Coffee House Society meetings translated into a social network of later contributors and likely readers of his periodical.

Another connection that Nicholson made at the Chapter Coffee House was Charles Hutton. In 1784, Hutton, a Fellow of the Royal Society, had a falling-out with Banks and apparently "planned to start up a rival publication to *Philosophical Transactions*." The disgruntled Fellow was collecting material for his philosophical periodical, and its first issue "was to be expected quite shortly," Charles Blagden informed Banks in 1785.¹⁵ Hutton gave up his

⁶Olsen (1999).

⁷Black (2006, p. 1325).

⁸Rose (2019).

⁹Rose (2019).

¹⁰Cole (1951, p. 139).

¹¹Levere & Turner (2002, p. 7).

¹²Levere & Turner (2002).

¹³Levere & Turner (2002).

¹⁴Levere & Turner (2002).

¹⁵Wardhaugh (2017, p. 51).

editorial plans for reasons that currently remain unknown—but it may have been through Hutton that Nicholson first encountered the idea of editing a philosophical periodical in London, outside the Royal Society's domain and the "Banksian Learned Empire."¹⁶

But the Coffee House Society was more than a place of philosophical socializing and networking for Nicholson: here, he honed a skill highly useful for his later editorial work. In mid-November 1784, he and William Babington were elected "first" and "second" secretaries of the society. During the gathering following his election, Nicholson appears to have raised 13 procedural matters for discussion and action. According to Trevor Levere and Gerard Turner, Nicholson ultimately "made the meetings much more effective and disciplined."¹⁷ His coordinating role not only kept him in touch with most of the society members, expanding and affirming his social circle among philosophers, it also furnished him with the experience of steering a group of philosophers and experimenters towards a productive and lasting exchange—a task similar to editorship.

Nicholson's work as secretary was unpaid, but he continued it for several years, until the society's demise. The fact that he did so, despite oftentimes facing financially precarious situations, indicates that philosophy was a priority in his life.¹⁸ This is important to keep in mind in order to fully understand why he took up editorship a decade later.

But although Nicholson was garnering experience and building a social network that would eventually turn into his central editorial resources, editorship was not his goal in the 1780s. During the late 1780s, after the Coffee House Society ceased to exist, Nicholson continued to establish himself among London's philosophical elites—likely due to his illustrious acquaintances such as Kirwan and Josiah Wedgwood. Wedgwood had been an honorary member of the Coffee House Society. More importantly, Nicholson had worked for Wedgwood on the continent, after the former's return to Europe in 1773. In the early 1780s, Wedgwood developed a porcelain pyrometer, based on the shrinkage of clay pellets, that enabled a relatively reliable measurement of temperatures.¹⁹ This apparently impressed Banks so much that Wedgwood was elected a FRS. Wedgwood was also the Queen's Potter and Banks knew him well.²⁰ Wedgwood, in turn, knew Nicholson well—and held him, and his organizational skills, in high esteem: as the first chairman of the General Chamber of Manufacturers of Great Britain and Ireland (1785–1787), Wedgwood sought out Nicholson for the position of the Chamber's secretary.

Likely accompanying Wedgwood and other acquaintances, Nicholson started to attend the *conversazioni* at Banks's house. In 1787, he asked Banks, as President, to communicate his paper on logarithms to the Royal Society. Nicholson chose the right person to forward his experiments to the Society, as even though Banks did not author any articles for the *Philosophical Transactions*, he communicated hundreds of them. Although he was theoretically one among many responsible for running the periodical, in practice he held the central editorial power.²¹ Banks agreed to present Nicholson's work at one of the Society's meetings, and it was subsequently published in the *Transactions*.²² Starting in 1787, Nicholson contributed one article to the Royal Society each year. But he was clearly hoping for more than publishing his philosophical undertakings in the *Transactions*. In 1782, before joining the Coffee House Society, he completed his *Introduction to Natural Philosophy*, which became standard reading for students, going through five editions in less than 25 years. Nicholson prefaced the first edition with a note to Banks: "taking the liberty of dedicating the following Treatise to the President of that respectable Body of Men, among whom the true Philosophy had its origin, and to whom it owes a great part of its improvements." Nicholson embellished the short note with a great deal of flattery. "All Europe is acquainted with the exertions you have made for its advancement," he stressed.²³ When he completed his *First Principles of Chemistry* in the late 1780s, Nicholson dedicated his work to a famous FRS, Henry Cavendish.²⁴ Admiring men like Banks and Cavendish as well as interacting

¹⁶Miller (1981).

¹⁷Levere & Turner (2002), quotation on p. 19.

¹⁸"Memoir of late Mr Nicholson" (1816, p. 71).

¹⁹For more details on Wedgwood's pyrometer, see Stewart (2008).

²⁰Stewart (2008, p. 24).

²¹Moxham (in press).

²²Nicholson (1787).

²³Nicholson (1782, pp. v–vi).

²⁴Nicholson (1790, front matter).

with eminent Fellows such as Kirwan and Wedgwood, Nicholson found himself drawn to the Royal Society, and had likely harbored the hope for a Fellowship since the early 1780s.

Interacting with Fellows and the President of the Royal Society, Nicholson was acutely aware that “men of high social status joined [the Society] easily, those of middling status less so, and those of low social class not at all.” Teachers, like Nicholson, could become Fellows of the Royal Society.²⁵ In other words, despite his background and upbringing, Nicholson had reason to believe that he could be elected a Fellow—even more so because he had Banks on his side, as the support of the President was a significant advantage.²⁶ Nicholson knew that Banks, in cases where he was well-disposed, was “generous with strategic advice on the best way into ... the Society.”²⁷ For example, he took Wedgwood's son Thomas under his wing and advised him to defer putting himself forward as a candidate for election until two of his papers “respecting the production of Light & heat from various bodies” had had time to appear in the *Philosophical Transactions*: “you will gain much upon the Good opinion of the members when they read your Papers at their Leisure & Consequently are able to understand them more fully than can be done by hearing them read.”²⁸ Banks likely extended similar advice to Nicholson, who very probably adhered to it. After all, even though the 1780s was the decade in which Nicholson acquired the key resources of his later editorial undertaking, his heart was still set on becoming an FRS and member of London's philosophical elite.

3 | NICHOLSON'S CENTRAL CONFLICT WITH BANKS

By 1790, Nicholson had published three articles with the *Philosophical Transactions* and was mingling with London's renowned men of science on a regular basis. But his good fortune was about to turn when he joined the Society for the Improvement of Naval Architecture. This society would become both the reason for and stage of Nicholson's earliest and most consequential conflict with Banks. The society appears to have been the idea of John Sewell, with whom Nicholson had published the *Navigator's Assistant, Containing the Theory and Practice of Navigation* in 1784.²⁹ The two men believed British ships to be “inferior to that of those designed and built in France and Spain.”³⁰ The society, they hoped, would encourage ship model testing and other activities by offering awards and medals. Officially founded in April 1791, the society's prospectus listed 133 members.³¹ Sewell proposed Nicholson as a member from the outset.

Nicholson became a member of the society's committee, while Banks served as Vice-President.³² The members appear to have worked well together—“till their operations began to be impeded by the jealousies” of the latter.³³ Since these events have apparently not been documented and discussed by scholars but are central to understanding why Nicholson took to editorship, the shortened account of an unnamed contemporary is provided here:

Not satisfied with being at the head of the Royal Society, he [Banks] was anxious to be at the head of this Society also. ... [T]he President was the late Earl Stanhope, a man of extraordinary talent.... Sir Joseph, however, uniformly thwarted the plans proposed by his lordship and the bulk of the Society, and soon formed a party of his own for the purpose of systematic annoyance. This led to a determination on the part of the main body to free themselves from this source of vexation. A series of resolutions was framed, proposed by the late Mr. William Nicholson (Editor of the *Philosophical Journal*), and

²⁵Sorrenson (1996), quotation on p. 33.

²⁶Chambers (2007).

²⁷Fyfe, Moxham, McDougall-Waters, & Røstvik (in press).

²⁸Chambers (2007, Vol. 4, p. 113).

²⁹Nicholson (1784).

³⁰Walker (2010), quotation on p. 40.

³¹Society for the Improvement of Naval Architecture (1791).

³²Society for the Improvement of Naval Architecture (1791, pp. 6–7).

³³A Correspondent (1820, p. 251).

carried by a large majority. In these the Society firmly declared their determination to support the President, so long as he continued to aid and sanction the legitimate objects of the Society. Sir Joseph shortly after retired from the institution; *but not to remain in inactivity*.³⁴

Nicholson's resolutions were not so much a move against Banks, but rather—in line with his earlier approach as secretary of the Coffee House Society—they reflected his objective of making the society work as efficiently as possible. Ultimately, however, the society collapsed and Banks, according to the anonymous report, contributed to this demise: he defamed both the group and Stanhope, the eccentric and politically liberal Earl, accusing them of being “a jacobinical [sic] confederacy with Citizen Stanhope at the head.”³⁵ The society appears to have dissolved in 1796, roughly 1 year before Nicholson published the first issue of his *Journal*.

This episode suggests that Banks's animosity towards Nicholson predated the latter becoming an editor, and thus means that Watts potentially over-emphasized the role that radical journalism played in the 1802 conflict between the two. However, we should not think of the disagreement between Banks and Nicholson at the society as the great rupture after which the two men descended into hostility. It is likely that, at first, Nicholson was not even aware of having wronged Banks, though he found out eventually. According to the same anonymous source quoted above:

Mr Nicholson [was] a neighbour of Sir Joseph's, in Soho Square, and a certain degree of intimacy, in consequence subsisted between them; Mr Nicholson occasionally conducting experiments on voltaism, &c. at the President's house. Still, his crime in opposing Sir Joseph in the Society of improving Naval Architecture was never cordially forgiven; nor was he ever admitted [as] a fellow of the Royal Society.³⁶

Nicholson was still able to participate in Banks's *conversazioni* and attend other meetings at the President's house; this was made possible by Banks's gentlemanly mores, according to which his library, the fine reception rooms, and the museum were open to visitors every morning. Once a week, on Thursdays, Banks held a formal reception at which a particular subject, usually selected in advance, was discussed in detail.³⁷ But admitting Nicholson to some minor public meetings was one thing, supporting his election as a Fellow was something very different. In 1796, Banks made it distinctly clear that he did not consider Nicholson fit for the Fellowship. The President apparently remarked: “To be sure Nicholson is a clever fellow. But you know he is only a sailor-boy turned schoolmaster; and we cannot, with any sort of propriety, admit such people among us.”³⁸ We know from a biography authored by Nicholson's son that Nicholson learned what Banks had said: “It came to my father's ears that Sir Joseph Banks was the chief objector [to Nicholson's election as FRS], having said that whatever pretensions Mr Nicholson had to the membership he did not think a ‘sailor boy’ a fit person to rank among the gentlemen members of the Royal Society or words to that effect.”³⁹ Banks seems to have deepened the divide between him and Nicholson by resorting to *ad hominem* attacks based on the existing socio-cultural gap between them.

In 1796, a year before Nicholson became an editor—and after more than a decade and a half of building a reputation for himself among philosophers—Nicholson saw his chances of joining the most influential and renowned British philosophical circle dwindle. As someone who had used his respected organizational skills to make groups and their philosophical endeavors more efficient and fruitful, Nicholson was not content with being merely a guest at *conversazioni* and soirees. He wanted more of what he was good at: fostering and maintaining the infrastructure of

³⁴A Correspondent (1820, pp. 251–252). Emphasis in original.

³⁵A Correspondent (1820, p. 252).

³⁶A Correspondent (1820, p. 252).

³⁷Musson & Robinson (1969, p. 124).

³⁸A Correspondent (1820, p. 252).

³⁹Nicholson Jr (2018, p. 90).

philosophical exchange, and participating in it. Editorship could enable Nicholson to do exactly this, but with one major advantage compared to his membership of the Coffee House Society and the Society for the Improvement of Naval Architecture—there would be no presidents or vice-presidents, no hierarchies of membership that more often than not mirrored the members' actual social ranks. As an editor outside of a society, Nicholson could initiate and organize philosophical exchange as he saw fit.

4 | NICHOLSON'S STAGNATION AND THE IDEA OF EDITORSHIP

The contretemps with Banks was not the only factor that influenced Nicholson's decision to become an editor. As Watts has pointed out, Nicholson was also well-connected to the print trade and to various radical writers. Two of these connections offer particular insights into both Nicholson's editorial and authorial experiences as well as his motivation to become editor.

One of the first regular meetings Nicholson frequented upon his return to London were the dinners of the Cannonians. The group got its name from their chairman, an "eccentric man of letters" named Cannon.⁴⁰ The Cannonians convened in a cook-shop in St. Martin's Lane, which was home to the city's leading color-shops: "in the upper room ... a daily party of men, afterwards destined to be eminent in Science, Art, and Literature, met to partake of ninepenny [sic] dinners."⁴¹ One of the Cannonians with whom Nicholson formed a close connection was William Holcroft, an author and dramatist from a poor background. Holcroft fervently supported the political empowerment of the individual, a belief that found expression in his support of the French Revolution.⁴² "It seems probable," wrote one of Nicholson's contemporaries, "that an intimacy he [Nicholson] formed with the late Mr. Holcroft, the Dramatic writer, might have persuaded him, that at least as much Revenues could be obtained from literary publications as from any of the objects to which he had before directed his thoughts."⁴³ Like Holcroft, Nicholson cultivated authorship in genres as eclectic as literary and periodical journalism. The latter seems to have started with smaller articles and reviews, mainly on *Belles Lettres*. Essays, tales, and poems followed.⁴⁴ Each genre had its own rules and peculiarities, and demanded that the author be familiar with both. Nicholson's experience with penning journalistic reviews and articles must have boosted his confidence to author philosophical pieces for his own periodical.

Holcroft likely influenced Nicholson's decision to become an editor in another way, too: by strengthening his motivation and determination, both directly and indirectly. Holcroft held a similar opinion on the Royal Society under Banks as he did on William Pitt's Parliament: he seems to have considered both of them to be "gentleman's clubs" and strongholds of monarchical loyalism. In 1796, when Nicholson felt the socio-cultural divide between himself and Banks as well as the impact of a gentleman's anger, Holcroft was a likely confidant for his frustration. After all, on Nicholson's return to England in the late 1770s, the two men had "lived many years together in the house of Southampton Row" and developed a close friendship.⁴⁵ Holcroft encouraged Nicholson not to simply accept the indignation he had suffered from Banks's words and behavior. Maybe it was even Holcroft who raised the topic of philosophical editorship because he had already been an editor: in 1783 and 1784, he operated *Wit's Magazine*, using fiction to advocate for political and social change.

In 1792, while the Society for the Improvement of Naval Architecture still existed, Nicholson gained his first experiences as an editor, and more particularly a book editor. He worked on William Godwin's *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*, revising the introduction and conclusion as well as other parts of the manuscript. Their collaboration was a close one: while they had met at Nicholson's house on only

⁴⁰Corlass (1882, p. 40). Cannon's first name is unknown.

⁴¹Corlass (1882, p. 40); Gatrell (2013).

⁴²Russell Mitford (1857); Taylor (2004, p. 101).

⁴³"Memoir of William Nicholson" (1812, p. 84).

⁴⁴"Memoir of William Nicholson" (1812, p. 84).

⁴⁵Nicholson Jr (2018, p. 56).

10 occasions the previous year, they convened there 40 times in 1792.⁴⁶ Once Nicholson had clashed with Banks and witnessed the President's apparent abuse of rank and socio-cultural power, he could relate to some of the ideas Godwin presented in the *Enquiry*. One such idea was that of the self-organizing capacities of the individual—of which sole editorship was an example.⁴⁷

Nicholson did not join in the political radicalism of Godwin and Holcroft: he “distinctly told them how far he differed from their way of thinking.”⁴⁸ He published his non-philosophical pieces anonymously, but ensured that his philosophical work appeared under his name.⁴⁹ This suggests that Nicholson perceived himself as a philosopher and wished to be perceived as one. Even though he did not subscribe to Godwin's and Holcroft's political ideas and priorities, he did subscribe to their idea that it was possible not only to defend but also to further one's interests through the printed page. As an editor, Nicholson would have the chance to remain relevant among men of science—and also to establish his philosophical reputation more widely.

5 | NEW, NOVEL, RADICAL?

Banks and his peers at the Royal Society would have perceived Nicholson's editorial ambitions as somewhat radical, had philosophical periodicals not been an omnipresent element in the everyday life of men of science. The Royal Society not only received philosophical transactions but also periodicals edited by individuals on the continent, and probably made at least some of these periodicals available to its Fellows at the Society's library.⁵⁰ Fellows such as the aforementioned Cavendish also subscribed to some of the continental periodicals edited by individuals rather than societies, such as Lorenz Crell's *Chemische Annalen*, which first came out in 1784.⁵¹

The last decades of the 18th century and the early decades of the 19th saw a flourishing of new natural philosophical periodicals in Europe. Whereas most of the older philosophical periodicals were associated with learned societies, the new generation had more diverse forms of editorship. In 1771, Abbe François Rozier founded his *Observations sur la physique* and was the first European to assume editorship outside a society or academy. From the mid-1780s, German professors, such as Crell, increasingly used philosophical editorship as a means to define their academic profiles and advance through university ranks.⁵² By the 1790s, most of the philosophical periodicals edited by individuals were based in the German lands.⁵³ In Paris, Louis Bernard Guyton de Morveau and other leading men of science edited the *Annales de Chimie*; following the example of Crell. They curated the periodical together, but outside of an academy or society. Individuals in the Netherlands, Italy, Scandinavia, and most likely other European countries also began to produce philosophical periodicals. When Nicholson commenced his editorship in 1797, he was continuing a “trend” that had existed on the continent for over a quarter of century, but, at the same time, he was committing to a novel form of philosophical communication in Britain.

Until Nicholson created his *Journal* in 1797, British natural philosophers would have associated independent editorship with foreign periodicals. All the British periodicals dealing with natural philosophy and natural history were linked with learned societies. Besides the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society, numerous philosophical societies in other British towns, including Manchester, Bath, and Edinburgh, published their own periodicals. The London-based Linnaean Society, which had close ties to the Royal Society, also printed its transactions.

⁴⁶Diary of William Godwin (1791–1792; 1792–1793), MS. Abinger e. 4; e. 5, Bodleian Library, Oxford, England.

⁴⁷Calhoun (2012). Godwin's diary notes at the Bodleian Libraries suggest that he and Nicholson dedicated their time to the topic of self-organizing capacities by discussing, for example, associations, cooperation, and contracts.

⁴⁸Nicholson Jr (2018, p. 49).

⁴⁹“Memoir of William Nicholson” (1812, p. 84).

⁵⁰M. B. Hall (1992).

⁵¹Jungnickel & McCormmach (2001, p. 380).

⁵²For example, Clark (2006).

⁵³Kronick (1962, p. 89).

Nicholson's *Journal* would be printed monthly, beginning in April 1797, and eventually ran to two series of 41 bound volumes. The first covered the years 1797 to 1801 in five volumes. The second series produced 36 octavo volumes from 1802 to 1813. The journal sold for 2s. 6d. a month and contained around 11 articles per issue.⁵⁴ Nicholson initially published his periodical in a quarto form, like the *Philosophical Transactions*, but by switching to the octavo form for the second series, he adopted the usual format for philosophical periodicals operated by individual editors in France, the German lands, and other European countries.⁵⁵ This editorial decision suggests that, at least initially, he modeled his periodical on the *Philosophical Transactions* rather than editor-run periodicals. But the contents—and nature—of Nicholson's *Journal* were notably different from the *Philosophical Transactions*.

6 | NICHOLSON'S CONCEPT OF EDITORSHIP

The *Philosophical Transactions*, which appeared annually in two installments, was a central, identity-affirming element of the Royal Society, particularly after the Society assumed editorial and financial responsibility for it in 1752. Most of its contributors were Fellows of the Society or their acquaintances, and the periodical was the manifestation of the learned sociability enjoyed by the Fellows at the Society's weekly meetings. Many of its contributors sought to situate their pieces within the established philosophical tradition, for example by tracing their subject of inquiry back to the Society's founding fathers or influential Fellows such as Isaac Newton.⁵⁶ The main reason to publish in the *Transactions* was to build or affirm one's reputation as a man of science in Britain and beyond.⁵⁷

One of Nicholson's achievements was to adopt this tradition of publishing philosophical texts and turn it into an instrument that catered to the day-to-day demands of experimenters. Nicholson created this philosophical instrument through his concept of editorship as well as individual editorial practices. Conceptually, he justified his assumption of the British society's periodical publishing tradition by linking his editorship to *utility*. "The leading character on which the selection of objects will be grounded is utility," Nicholson wrote in the preface to his first issue. He stressed that originality was not his main objective, but would be "subordinate to ... public utility and interesting research."⁵⁸ According to Nicholson, filling his periodical with original papers—the key feature of the *Philosophical Transactions*—"would be a work of comparatively much less value to Philosophers and the Public."⁵⁹ Nicholson had "a firm belief in progress, and in the ability of useful knowledge to advance the state of mankind, provided it was diffused and popularized."⁶⁰ As, for example, Joel Mokyr and Margaret Jacob have explained with a focus on Britain, employing philosophy for practical ends and the greater good of society was a fundamental ideal of late 18th-century society and industrialization.⁶¹ By situating his editorship within this zeitgeist, Nicholson tried—and managed—to adopt the tradition of society-based periodical publishing without belittling it or offending its adherents.

Furthermore, editorship, according to Nicholson's preface, implied "impartiality and care."⁶² The value of impartiality was not something as universally accepted and sought after among Nicholson's peers as it is today among scholars and scientists, but it was of particular importance to Nicholson. He had already pledged philosophical impartiality at the beginning of his *First Principles of Chemistry*, seeking "to exclude theoretical allusions" in order to "keep clear of every system."⁶³ "It would be very advantageous to science," he continued in his well-received work, "if this

⁵⁴Brock & Meadows (1998, p. 90).

⁵⁵van Marum (1826, pp. 115–118).

⁵⁶E.g., Tennant (1797, pp. 124–127). Here, the author refers to a study by Antoine Lavoisier but nonetheless links his investigation to a conjecture by Isaac Newton.

⁵⁷Fyfe, Moxham, McDougall-Waters, & Røstvik (2016).

⁵⁸Nicholson (1797b, pp. iii, iv).

⁵⁹"Nicholson's Journal of Natural Philosophy" (1799, p. 284).

⁶⁰Mokyr (2011, p. 253).

⁶¹Mokyr (2011); Jacob (1997).

⁶²Nicholson (1797b, p. iv).

⁶³Nicholson (1790, pp. vi–vii).

resolution, which I have adhered to with my best endeavors, were more generally adopted.”⁶⁴ Nicholson's prioritization of impartiality is somewhat reminiscent of the disinterestedness that genteel men of science had adopted as a philosophical virtue roughly a century earlier and was still present in the “Banksian Learned Empire” in the 1790s.⁶⁵ The Royal Society and Nicholson held epistemic values that, although rooted in two different concepts of the human being, nonetheless point to a similar understanding of and approach to philosophy: keeping philosophical enquiries free of individual interests. A similarity of epistemic values likely also helped Nicholson to establish his periodical among his contemporaries.

Nicholson needed to maintain a high degree of flexibility for his journal to be a useful instrument to his peers. Specific editorial strategies had to be malleable and generally open to discussion. To this end, he did not define his editorial agenda too rigorously: “As the events present themselves,” he wrote, “the proper mode of conduct will itself stand forward and leave no cause for hesitation.”⁶⁶ In this way, Nicholson provided the experimenters and men of science among his readers with the opportunity to define and shape his *Journal* according to their purposes, needs, and philosophical interests.

7 | NICHOLSON'S EDITORIAL STRATEGIES

Conducting a philosophical periodical outside a learned society in the second half of the 18th century required overcoming a number of challenges. In Britain, distrust and skepticism towards the individual editor dominated the conceptual and organizing principles of philosophical editorship. Editors were considered prone to prejudice and bias, but group editorship could curb and contain the individual's weaknesses. That was the Royal Society's goal in 1752 when it assumed responsibility for the *Philosophical Transactions*, which previously had usually been under the care of the Society's Secretaries.⁶⁷ Nicholson's editorial strategies addressed the distrust and skepticism and aimed to appease them—one of these was reprinting.

For the first roughly 3 years of the *Journal*'s existence, reprinting was a central editorial strategy for Nicholson. His selection of content was a source of his editorial credibility since he predominantly reprinted articles from the most respected domestic and foreign philosophical publications, thereby demonstrating regular access to central philosophical organs and dialogues. Reprinting allowed Nicholson to follow through on his promise of utility: establishing his periodical as a balance to the “very limited circulation of academic Transactions,” he made it useful to philosophers and experimenters whose social backgrounds, geographical locations, language skills, and other obstacles prevented them from being a member of a particular society and perusing its transactions.⁶⁸

The character of Nicholson's *Journal* changed somewhat in 1800. After Nicholson succeeded in decomposing water and published his account of the experiment, he began to receive and print more original contributions. His editorial strategy was to publish them as quickly as possible—though sometimes this was not possible. In the issue from August 1806, for example, he informed his contributors and readers of the “great accession of Original Correspondence,” which he dealt with by postponing the papers to later issues, rather than foregoing publication of any of them.⁶⁹ Nicholson made sure his *Journal* mirrored the interests and priorities of his philosophical contributors. In so doing, he followed the editorial credo he had articulated in his very first issue: “whatever ... the intentions of the ... Editor, [the c]orrespondents will arrange for themselves such materials as they think fit to publish.”⁷⁰

In 1800, the eminent naturalist Georges Cuvier turned to Nicholson, asking to print an appeal in the *Journal* in which he requested British naturalists to send him accounts of their fossil bones. Nicholson ran Cuvier's note.⁷¹ The

⁶⁴Nicholson (1790, p. vii).

⁶⁵Shapin (1994).

⁶⁶Nicholson (1797b, p. iv).

⁶⁷Fyfe et al. (2016); Fyfe, Moxham, McDougall-Waters, & Røstvik (2018).

⁶⁸Nicholson (1797b, p. iv).

⁶⁹Nicholson (1806b, p. 352).

⁷⁰Nicholson (1797b, p. iii).

⁷¹Nicholson (1800).

publication of appeals such as Cuvier's was an editorial strategy that promised solutions to challenges that philosophers encountered on a daily basis. An appeal in Nicholson's *Journal* was especially promising when a philosopher had exhausted other possibilities—for example, when inquiring for relevant accounts or specimens among one's established philosophical network had turned out to be fruitless. For many experimenters in Britain and abroad, Nicholson's *Journal* promised a greater reach than their established epistolary communications. This made the periodical a significant resource, not just for reporting new discoveries but for seeking out material that might enable such discoveries. Appeals like Cuvier's were not an established feature of transactions and memoirs, which suggests that, whereas society- and academy-based periodicals *mirrored, maintained, and attested* to philosophical sociability, editor-run periodicals like Nicholson's were notably more able to *create* and *modify* philosophical sociability in a way that could quickly deal with research challenges.

In June 1806, a correspondent wrote in Nicholson's *Journal*: "since the publication of the sketch of my experiments, I have had the pleasure to read Mr. Hatchett's very interesting account of various natural substances, nearly allied to coal; and I could not help being struck with the resemblance which my results bear to them."⁷² One of Nicholson's editorial strategies was to connect similar strands of research and put experimenters in touch with each other. This had the potential to make experiments and philosophical inquiries more efficient, for example by combining them, thereby either saving resources or exhausting them more fully. As in the example above, it appears that Nicholson's editorship altered the social fabric of philosophy by fostering its ability of self-organization—a self-organization similar to that which we observe in London around 1800, mainly with the advent of new philosophical societies such as the Askesian (1796), British Mineralogical (1799), London Chemical (1806), Geological (1807), City Philosophical (1809), and the Philosophical Society of London (1811).

In July 1797, Nicholson reprinted a paper from the *Philosophical Transactions* on the refraction of light caused by air evaporating from the ocean.⁷³ He printed it alongside a decade-old piece from the American Philosophical Society describing the same optical illusion as observed from a lakeshore.⁷⁴ The following month, Nicholson published his own article on the Fata Morgana.⁷⁵ Several readers commented on the optics in Nicholson's explanation and Nicholson subsequently answered their queries. As late as August 1806, a correspondent to Nicholson's *Journal* documented a mirage and connected it to Nicholson's explanation of the Fata Morgana.⁷⁶ This example demonstrates how Nicholson turned correspondence into an almost decade-long philosophical discourse on mirages. This discourse was international and wove together roughly a quarter-century of insights into the optical phenomenon. Compared to society transactions, Nicholson used his periodical more strategically, to bring together observations on philosophical phenomena and to foster the continuing collective research into their explanations.

With an emphasis on philosophical rigor and sound methodology, Nicholson included annotations to many articles. In these, he routinely offered explanations of units of measurement, since they varied from country to country or even from city to city. Furthermore, he used his annotations to question the accuracy of statements or suggest ways to improve experiments. This was particularly true for pieces written and originally published outside of Britain. Translating a German paper on candle design by the eminent philosopher Sigismund Friedrich Hermbstädt, for example, Nicholson offered comments on how to increase the experiment's accuracy: he invited Hermbstädt to take notice of overlooked factors like the thickness of the wicks.⁷⁷ Similarly, Nicholson frequently cautioned his audience to take some articles with a grain of salt. "The above account has appeared in several publications of credit," Nicholson wrote in the issue of January 1806, "but it is probable the account is exaggerated in several respects."⁷⁸ Accordingly, he did not print the whole article, but an abridged version on the last pages of the issue that were usually reserved for short reports under the title "Scientific News." Moreover, when reprinted or original pieces made

⁷²J. Hall (1806, p. 201).

⁷³Huddart (1797).

⁷⁴Ellicott (1797).

⁷⁵Nicholson (1797a).

⁷⁶Buchan (1806).

⁷⁷Herbststädt (1801).

⁷⁸Nicholson (1806a, p. 92).

mention of earlier publications, Nicholson tried to provide some bibliographical information so that his readers would be able to consult the respective sources. The editorial strategies of providing rigorous commentary and bibliographical details and curating careful skepticism made Nicholson's *Journal* a—potentially—reliable instrument of research.

Pietro Corsi has emphasized how evanescent journals could be in the 18th and 19th centuries: most were always teetering on the edge of economic viability. Corsi linked their survival to the determination of their editors—men like Nicholson who expanded the epistemological infrastructure at a time when this trend was taking off—“rather than to the intrinsic explicit function of communication the periodical was supposed to embody.”⁷⁹ But the scholarly emphasis on the commercial context obscures the qualities of Nicholson's *Journal* as an instrument of research. His periodical was not only a by-product of the rapidly evolving periodical market, but also an infrastructural element that contributed to the burgeoning of philosophy around 1800. In contrast to the *Philosophical Transactions* and many other society memoirs, Nicholson's *Journal* was not an artifact of philosophical tradition, but was defined by its day-to-day utility—characterized by several explicit functions, including solving the day-to-day challenges of experimenters, making research more rigorous, combining research undertakings on the same topics, and last but not least, keeping experimenters abreast of philosophical developments.

8 | BANKS'S REACTION TO NICHOLSON'S JOURNAL

Watts has discussed the incident of 1802, when “Nicholson found he had accidentally printed two previously unpublished Royal Society papers in a single issue” of his *Journal*, thereby bringing Banks's wrath upon himself.⁸⁰ But a wider context reveals that Banks generally did not oppose Nicholson's editorial endeavor. Banks's philosophical correspondence from 1797 and the following years does not include any mention of Nicholson's new journal; there is no evidence that he immediately perceived Nicholson's editorship as a threat to the Society's and his own epistemological authority.⁸¹ And he also calmed down quickly after the 1802 incident. After all, Nicholson expanded the communicational infrastructure in a way that mostly did not overlap with that of the Royal Society and, therefore, was not a form of competition that Banks needed to quell. Nicholson created an instrument for the day-to-day demands of research—something very different from the *Philosophical Transactions*: philosophers used the Royal Society's periodical to *become* (known as) men of science; they used Nicholson's periodical to *be* men of science. In contrast to Banks and the Royal Society, Nicholson was willing to let his journal be used for debate, discussion, and controversy.

Despite his falling-out with Nicholson, Banks tended to be rather accommodating and cooperative. He regularly forwarded his own writings to Nicholson, agreeing to having them reprinted in Nicholson's *Journal*, as short notes introducing all these articles suggest. The majority of these 13 papers are articles that Banks authored for the transactions of the Horticultural Society.⁸² Banks also used Nicholson's publication as a platform for announcing and generating more attention for his own project of introducing the Spanish merino sheep to the royal flock at Windsor.⁸³ In contrast to the majority of Nicholson's contributors, Banks did not primarily utilize the periodical as an experimenter but a communicator; for over a decade, he addressed a broad circle of philosophers through the *Journal*. Banks's voluntary authorial presence in the *Journal* attests to the fact that he—and, therefore, likely a number of FRS—did not perceive the periodical as a journalistic commodity that had to be avoided, due to some unruly links to the radical press.

Banks did not object to philosophical journals conducted by individual editors outside of societies, he objected to individuals who went against his interests and opinions. Nicholson's editorship generally did not attract much of

⁷⁹Corsi (2016, p. 327).

⁸⁰Watts (2014, p. 417).

⁸¹Chambers (2007).

⁸²Banks, (1805; 1807; 1808a; 1808b; 1809; 1811a; 1811b; 1811c; 1812).

⁸³Banks (1800, 1803, 1804).

the president's attention. The latter was too busy maintaining and bolstering his "Learned Empire."⁸⁴ Having, for example, invested time and money into the foundation and development of the Royal Institution in the late 1790s, Banks had to accept that "the Institution has irrevocably fallen into the hands of the enemy [Thomas Bernard and Sir John Hippisley], and is now perverted to a hundred uses for which ... I never intended it."⁸⁵ But Banks faced more serious challenges to his "Empire," since, as mentioned above, the landscape of knowledge production in London was changing dramatically around 1800 and during the 1800s.⁸⁶ With a new wave of philosophical self-organization sweeping through the metropolis, Nicholson's editorship and *Journal* were not as pressing a threat to Banks's empire as others—allowing Nicholson to combine traditional philosophical communication with the changing demands of experimenters at home and abroad.

9 | CONCLUSION

In winter of 1802, 5 years after becoming an editor and shortly after his conflict with Banks, Nicholson commented that editing "has afforded an infinitely more valuable remuneration [than the monetary one] in the private friendship and public approval of men, whose talents and virtues give the power of conferring the truly estimable part of fame."⁸⁷ These were no empty words. After all, Nicholson spent years of work on a periodical that could not provide him with sufficient funds to avoid debtors' prison.⁸⁸ But editorship offered him a way to participate in and steer philosophical discourse—as well as to earn "celebrity" and be considered "truly ingenious" among renowned men of science.⁸⁹ In other words, conducting his periodical helped Nicholson achieve the goals towards which he had worked throughout the 1780s and 1790s, prior to the falling-out with Banks in the mid-1790s.

Nicholson's editorship was characterized by more than the mere commercial "capacity to survive"; it shaped the traditional, well-established discourse that was carried out in the pages of the *Philosophical Transactions*.⁹⁰ For most of Nicholson's *Journal*'s existence, it was referenced, both directly and indirectly, in the *Transactions*.⁹¹ Furthermore, discourses on particular philosophical topics that began in Nicholson's *Journal* were continued in the pages of the *Transactions*. The Copley Medal-winning chemist William Henry, for example, introduced one of his articles by stating that his "attention has been again drawn ... by the important controversy which has lately been carried on between Mr. Murray and Mr. John Davy," citing Nicholson's *Journal*.⁹² In short, Nicholson's editorship had an impact on the central organ of philosophical knowledge-production in Britain—making Nicholson not a philosophical outsider, but a significant philosophical agent.

The effort that Nicholson put into becoming part of the philosophical elite, the falling-out with Banks, and Banks's socio-cultural dominance over Nicholson suggest that Nicholson's break with the historical convention of collective philosophical editorship can be seen as philosophical subversion. Nicholson's editorial strategies challenged the epistemological lineage of the Royal Society and its use of the printed page. For example, criticizing the limited circulation of the *Transactions*, Nicholson turned the publication's defining feature—its exclusivity—into an obstacle to philosophical experimentation and progress. Nicholson de facto violated preconceived notions regarding the *Transactions* and the Society's high epistemological significance. This became the premise of one of his central editorial strategies, namely reprinting. Making use of this strategy, Nicholson problematized or perhaps even pathologized

⁸⁴Miller (1981).

⁸⁵Jones (1871, p. 263).

⁸⁶For a study of institutions, the novel and particularly omnipresent form of philosophical grouping in the 1800s and 1810s, see Klancher (2013).

⁸⁷Nicholson (1802, p. 1).

⁸⁸Watts (2014, p. 408).

⁸⁹"Memoir of William Nicholson, Esq." (1812, p. 83); "Memoir of Late Mr Nicholson" (1816, p. 71).

⁹⁰Corsi (2016, p. 327).

⁹¹For example, in the articles of the highly respected FRS Hatchett (1805, p. 212), Davy (1810, p. 242), and Wollaston (1812, p. 370).

⁹²Henry (1812, p. 238).

the epistemological structures of the *Philosophical Transactions* and, thereby, the Royal Society—month after month, issue after issue. In so doing, he was one of the forces that slowly undermined the “Banksian Learned Empire” and contributed to the changing landscape of philosophical discourse. Looking at Nicholson in the philosophical context not only tells us more about the individual and his editorship, it also helps to make visible some of the processes and forces that underlay the burgeoning of philosophy, particularly in London, in the 1800s.

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